THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Plotting the Resurrection

March 30, 1997
Easter Sunday

John M. Buchanan

Resurrection means that Jesus did not die into nothingness, but into that ineffable and incomprehensible last and first reality which we denote by the name God. When human beings reach their last eschaton ... what awaits them there? Not nothingness, but that All which is God. Death is a transition to God, an entry into God's hiddenness, into that sphere which transcends all our notions, which no human eye has ever seen and which is thus removed from our grasp, understanding, reflection and imagination! If that word mystery is appropriate anywhere it is appropriate in the resurrection of new life.

Hans Küng
Credo

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 E. Chestnut Street
Chicago, Illinois 60611

PLOTTING THE RESURRECTION
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Scripture:
Isaiah 25:6-9
Mark 16:1-8

One of my favorite writers is the late E.B. White. White was the editor of the *New Yorker* and wrote those wonderful introductory columns for each issue for years. He also wrote *Charlotte's Web*, a delightful story most parents have read to their children.

One time, late in his life, he wrote an essay about his wife who had died a few years earlier. She loved to garden: every year planned carefully, ordered from seed catalogues, created a new diagram for each year's planting. After she became ill, and nearly an invalid, she continued and managed somehow to get herself outside when it was time to plant.

White wrote:

> "Armed with a diagram and clipboard, Catherine would get into a shabby old raincoat, much too long for her, and put on a little round wool hat and proceed to the director's chair placed at the edge of the plot. There she would sit, hour after hour, with the wind and the weather, while Henry Allen produced dozens of paper packages of new bulbs and a basket full of old ones, ready for the intricate interment. There was something comical, yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion. The small, hunched-over figure: her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be another spring: oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand; sitting there with her chart under those dark skies in the dying October calmly plotting the resurrection."[i]

It occurred to me that maybe that's why we're here this morning: why all over the world this morning people in unprecedented numbers, people who don't ordinarily come to public worship, or probably more accurately, people who attend occasionally – all are here today, together, in some way or another, like Mrs. White, sitting by her garden in October, plotting the resurrection.

One thing for sure – there are a lot of us today.

In his fine new book, Peter Gomes, minister of Memorial Church at Harvard University, has an entire section on the peculiar behavior of people and ministers on Easter. There is, he says, "a primal, almost homing instinct to church" on Easter, with the predictable result that churches are so full, some can't get in ... a problem we have here occasionally. Gomes says he recently heard an angry visitor to Memorial Church at Harvard attacking the usher who had just told him there

was no space left. "What do you mean, there's no space. You've got to let me in. I've got my rights. You can't keep me out of church." He represented the same kind of disappointed crowd that gets left out of a rock concert or sporting event.

The preachers, on the other hand, behave equally curiously. The secret delight of clergy is that we live all year for a morning like this. We know better, of course, but we can't resist the notion that you've come to hear us ... and this year we'll get it so right, it will happen again next Sunday. And so what the preacher does, for some reason, is scold the congregation for coming. Gomes remembers a pastor of his youth who one Easter Sunday "let out a year's accumulated bile..." and who welcomed the huge Easter morning congregation by "wishing them a Happy Memorial Day, a Glorious Fourth of July, a Good Labor Day, a Peaceful Veteran's Day and a Gracious Thanksgiving, and by wishing them as well a Happy Mothers' Day, Happy Fathers' Day, Happy Children's Day and Happy Birthdays for the year. He did this with a smile, while making the point that not only did he not expect to see them again before next Easter, but he was annoyed, and so was God. The large congregation of course blushed and tittered, and waited for him to get it out of his system."[ii]

The problem with the preacher, of course, is that we're afraid we're not up to this job. And we're right. The Easter message simply exceeds anybody's ability and so we comfort ourselves with the hype that you'll enjoy the great hymns, anthems and beautiful flowers. Our frustration this morning is that we have more to say than we know how to say.

There is precedence, by the way, for the preacher's dilemma. It's in the text for the Easter story this year, from the Gospel of Mark, the first account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth to have been written, probably sometime between 50 and 60 A.D. Each of the gospels tells the Easter story a little differently. Mark's version is brief, to the point. "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them: and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." [Mark 16:8 (NRSV)] And then, the story ends. Later, someone added some more material to bring the book to a less awkward and troublesome end. But the original, apparently, comes to an abrupt end with amazement, fear and silence.

They had come to his grave early in the morning as the sun rose. It was the first day of the week. Just one week before, the three of them were in the crowd as he entered the city. They were there when he was betrayed and arrested. They were there as he was crucified – Mark makes sure we understand – these three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and a woman by the name of Salome, saw it all. They are the eyewitnesses. They had come with him all the way from Galilee. And again Mark tells us that they were the ones who saw the burial, watched as Joseph of Arimathea claimed the body and carried it to his garden and placed it in his tomb and rolled a large stone over the opening.

Eyewitnesses. The three of them come to the tomb as soon as they can after the Sabbath, as soon as they can see. They bring spices to anoint the body of their friend. They wonder, as they walk, how they will manage to move the stone over the opening. When they arrive – the stone is rolled away. They enter, see a young man and they are alarmed, which has to be one of the great understatements of all of literature. Someone has either stolen the body or else something is

going on here that quite defies their common sense and their faith. They are not expecting resurrection.

> *"Do not be alarmed: you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised: he is not here. Look – go tell his disciples – he is going ahead of you to Galilee."*

The Easter story comes to an end with the three eyewitnesses afraid, amazed and not speaking a word of it to anyone. Could it be that the earliest account is very intentional and does not want to focus on what ends up getting all our attention, namely – how did it happen? What happened? Did it really happen? It's almost as if this ancient text knows that if we focus on that we will miss the point which is, apparently, what the young man tells them – "he is going ahead of you to Galilee: there you will see him, just as he told you."

And theologians and historians, biologists, anthropologists and psychologists have been fighting for 2,000 years about what actually happened. Every year there is a new eye-catching discovery; the Shroud of Turin, a skeleton in a cave. This year's debate is whether the Way of Sorrows/ Via Dolorosa, began here or there. A good friend of mine, Douglas Ottati, who teaches theology at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, is currently under fire for what he said or didn't say about what happened or didn't happen to the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth. And all the while, the earliest account points us away from all of that and ahead, to the future, to Galilee, where he will be going before you.

This is not about a corpse. This is about the experience of the risen and living Christ which, indeed, those frightened friends of his did encounter in the days ahead; the experience of the risen and living Jesus which has stirred and inspired and convinced and converted millions upon millions of his friends down through the centuries.

The resurrection is not just about survival, his, or ours. It is about the future, about what really matters in this world, about what you and I can hope for and count on and give our lives to.

Steve Hancock, a Presbyterian pastor in Nashville, who reminded me of the E.B. White essay, tells about John Jasper, a nineteenth century slave in the American South who became a Christian and a powerful preacher. At the funeral of a friend, he framed a brilliant dialogue with death – you can almost see John Jasper standing beside an open grave and shouting,

> "Death! Death! Show me your banners. I heard you got a mighty banner down there. Show me your banners!"

And death answers:

> "Ain't got no banners. Had banners. But King Jesus passed through here and tore all my banners down. Made me open my gates and let all his children pass from here to glory."

"Ain't got no banners." Well sometimes it seems like death has all the banners -- death and its claque: evil, sin, innocent suffering, tragedy.
Three white Chicago teenagers attack a 13 year-old African-American lad and beat him brutally and he ends up in Cook County Hospital fighting for his life. They're "taking care of niggers in the neighborhood," they brag. And you realize that the evil of racism has a high and bright banner still and that in spite of the progress we have made, it is still a dangerous thing to be black in this city.

Or the IRA detonates bombs, or the Protestant para-militaries machine-gun a Catholic pub and you realize that religious bigotry has a high banner.

Or the Hutus and Tutsis slaughter one another and the Croats, Serbs, Bosnians look warily at one another through telescopic sights and you realize ethnic hatred has a banner.

Or you drive through Cabrini and see it in all its stark, grim reality as I do, 3-4 times a week, early morning or late at night, on the way to or from O'Hare. What a shock it is to get off a slick Boeing 757, walk through Helmut Jahn's stunning United terminal, enter a waiting cab and then this – this is what we have done and you realize that racism and greed, economic opportunism and poverty and irresponsible public policy and now an entrenched, unholy collaboration between the illicit drug economy and those who live and breed off it … and the moralists who will not even consider a new way of thinking about this deadly epidemic of drugs and violence that is killing our children … and the misguided souls with their very powerful lobby who insist that the drug dealer ought to live in a land where everybody has access to an automatic weapon. All of it just a mile from Bloomingdale's and Fourth Presbyterian Church, and you realize and see the high banner of evil.

Or the church you love because it has always, and often courageously, represented God's grace and inclusive love, suddenly seems not so inclusive – in fact seems to think inclusivity is not such a good idea any more.

Or the test is positive, the lump is malignant, the infant has leukemia, your beloved dies, the plane crashes, the pink slip appears in your box, your dream dies.

Over the years, we have come to the conclusion that evil has banners. And over the years we accommodate and maybe allow ourselves less joy, and maybe stop loving so passionately because we know we will lose what we love and in the end it will hurt very badly; or care a little less passionately about justice, and hope in our city and world because the problems are so huge and the inertia is so heavy and immovable and we give a little less of ourselves to the causes that are precious to us because we have encountered entrenched bigotry and exclusivism and suddenly it seems to be comfortably in control of our world. And to all of us the unlikely, stunning, sometimes terrifying word today is –

"He is not here. He is risen. He goes before you."

The word today is that King Jesus has the banners. And love and compassion and justice and peace are the enduring realities and that you and I can give our hearts and our lives and our hope and our passion because Jesus Christ has defeated the power of sin and death and promises to go ahead of us into our future where we will meet him.

And indeed it is finally very personal. We do not talk easily about it, but it is about, finally, the mystery of our life and death, of our mortality.

The word to each of us this day is a word of love, of God's love, of God's love that has conquered death, of God's love which walks through the valley of the shadow, of God's love from which nothing shall ever separate us – even death.

It is a word bigger than any of us can articulate or even understand. But do hear it. Hear it in the glorious music this day. Experience it in the joy of a worshipping congregation and children's faces and the affectionate touch of aging hands.

Let it into your life. Let it inspire you to care more, love more, give more, live more.

Let it change you – turn you around – let it free you from the putting in of time, the waiting for death; free you from fear.

Hear the words – *"He is not here. He is risen. He goes before you."*

And then – plot – in your life – plot the resurrection.

O God of infinite love –how can we thank you for this day? All glory and honor are yours and laughter and freedom and joy and everlasting love. Alleluia.

Amen.

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[i] E.B. White: A Biography, Scott Elledge, W. W. Norton & Co., 1984 p. 353

[ii] The Good Book, Peter Gomes, p. 332